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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by KATHLEEN BLISS

12th November, 1947

NEWS-LETTER

FRANK THOMPSON

THE YUGOSLAV YOUTH RAILWAY

SUPPLEMENT

SOME THOUGHTS ON BRITAIN FROM ABROAD

BY J. E. L. NEWBIGIN

A FEW MONTHS AGO THERE WAS published a book of war letters and memoirs which has a quality about it which holds the attention of the reader from the first page, and that in spite of the inevitably disconnected form which the book takes. It is called *There is a Spirit in Europe*.[1] Frank Thompson was the son of Edward Thompson, the novelist and writer on Indian affairs. His home was in Oxford, his school was Winchester, his university was Oxford. He was a classical scholar of considerable promise and something of a poet. The liberal-radical influence of his home showed itself both in his wide culture and in his acute awareness of a position of privilege. He joined the Labour Club and worked for Lindsay in the now famous Munich by-election. But conviction and disillusionment alike pushed him in one direction, and in 1939 he joined the Communist party. The war came: he volunteered immediately and was soon in the Middle East.

The book consists of extracts from his letters and diary. It is full, on the one hand, of an intense love of England, of remarks about the English countryside which he knew as something of an amateur naturalist, of comments on his debt to Winchester and on his continued reading of the

[1] *There is a Spirit in Europe. . . .* A memoir of Frank Thompson, collected by T. J. T. and E. P. T. Gollancz, 12s. 6d.

classics ; and, on the other hand, of an eager and voracious desire to acquire at first hand " the feel " of modern Russia and of the Balkan countries. He devoted much of his spare time to improving a knowledge of Russian acquired at Winchester : from this he proceeded to acquire a working knowledge of five or six Slav languages.

In 1943 he was chosen for a dangerous mission, that of making contact between the British forces and the partisans in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. As second in command of a small party he parachuted into Southern Serbia and joined up with the Bulgarian partisans. Only three letters reached his home. The rest of the narrative is completed by accounts collected from the sole British survivor and from the partisans with whom he fought and by whom he was greatly respected and loved. He was captured when on the point of success, given a mock trial by the Nazi police, and shot.

Why should Christians read this book ? Because if they want an answer to the question, why do some young men and women brought up in the heart of the English tradition and filled with its treasures embrace the crude dogmas of Communism, here it is in the thoughts and actions of a young man who desperately wanted to share the upsurge of vitality which he felt was present in the common people of Russia. He found this spirit not only among the Russian soldiers and lorry drivers whom he met in the Middle East, but among the Balkan partisans with whom in so short a space of time he so completely identified himself. In one of his last letters he said : " There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood. You can, if you like, think of it in terms of politics, but it is broader and more generous than any dogma. It is the confident will of whole peoples, who have known the utmost humiliation and suffering and who have triumphed over it, to build their own life once for all."

One of the tragedies of Western Europe is that the spirit of comradeship, sacrifice and endurance which made the various resistance movements what they were, has almost

C. N-L.

20 Balcombe Street,
Dorset Square,
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November, 1947.

Dear News-Letter Reader,

You may be one of the many readers who regularly send a News-Letter subscription as a Christmas gift to one or more friends. If so, you will be expecting this leaflet.

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The News-Letter is doing an important job in Europe. Our circulation in Germany, for example, goes up and up, not only among individual British subscribers in all sorts of positions, but in army rest rooms, D.P. camps and among German pastors, school-teachers, T.U. leaders, editors of new publications and many others. We can use as many subscriptions as are given to us for people in all parts of Europe.

The completed forms should reach us by **December 13th** so that the gift subscription may begin with the issue of December 24th.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

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entirely disintegrated. About Eastern Europe and the spirit of the people who live there we know very little.

There has been in recent months at least one indication that the " spirit abroad in Europe ", of which Frank Thompson spoke, has not died amongst young people. The United Nations War Damage Sub-Commission on a tour of inspection in Yugoslavia last year discovered in the heart of Bosnia a railway 55 miles long being built by young people of Yugoslavia and of neighbouring Balkan countries, from the coal mines of Banovici to the main line railway at Brčko.[1] In May and June, 14,000 village youngsters worked on the railway and when they had gone home for harvesting they were replaced by 29,000 students from secondary schools and universities, who in their turn were replaced by 16,000 village boys and girls. In six months the gigantic enterprise had been completed by the work of 60,000 young people. It was carefully prepared for by radio, press and cinema and the progress of the work was kept before the public eye. Every day six hours work on the railway was followed by a great variety of educational activities. 5,800 illiterates joined the project, and 5,100 of them returned not only able to read but anxious to teach illiterates around their own homes. Of the students who came 250 were selected by the Yugoslav Youth Council to be trained as instructors and have been sent out into the most backward parts of Yugoslavia on a campaign to extinguish illiteracy among adults. Several thousand young people were given short technical courses in railroad construction: others were given instruction in hygiene, public health and physical training to enable them to take part in a campaign to improve the health and physique of the people. Visiting professors from the universities conducted courses on a wide range of subjects. Orchestras and theatrical companies came out from Belgrade and there was plenty of the spontaneous self-entertainment which characterizes all gatherings of young people.

[1] An account of the building of this railway appeared in the *Times Educational Supplement*, October 11th, 1947, and of the longer railway in *The Times*, October 22nd, 1947.

The underlying conception of the project was not only to get the railway built, necessary as this was, but to call upon young people to take part in a voluntary piece of service, clearly and obviously of use to the nation, and through it to give them some inkling of the meaning of citizenship to counteract the moral corruption of black market and Nazi occupation, and a desire to work for the betterment of their people. At the same time, there was a strong emphasis on the value of the project as an international experiment, and 1,500 volunteers from abroad took part in the building of the railway while other young Yugoslavs went to work on similar enterprises in Bulgaria and Rumania.

So great was the success of the initial enterprise that this year it was followed by a much larger one—the building of a railway 150 miles long from Šamac to Sarajevo. This project was the work of 180,000 Yugoslavs and 4,300 visitors from eleven other countries, each of whom worked without payment on the railway for three weeks, and then received a week's holiday in Yugoslavia, paid for by the Yugoslav government. The work was extremely hard and a certain number of technical experts were needed. The railway winds through hilly country and has 37 stations, 5 bridges and 4 tunnels. Each national group organized its own work and arranged a great variety of exchanges with other brigades in their free time. One particularly interesting point was the presence of a mixed Arab-Jewish brigade from Palestine. The British volunteers, numbering 400, were recruited through the National Union of Students and the British-Yugoslav Association. They were led by Frank Thompson's younger brother.

A reader of the News-Letter, the headmistress of a large school, has sent us an interesting comment on the effect of this enterprise on one of her students. The headmistress writes :—

> " I deal with young people between 12 and 18, but a large part of my time is spent with the Sixth Form, 60 or 70 girls shortly going on to our universities, training colleges, etc.

It increasingly strikes me how impatient they are with the continued pessimism around; as one girl said recently about something she wanted to do, 'It's no good waiting till the crisis is over, because my whole life has been lived in crises, and I have got to do this in spite of crises'. I believe this feeling of theirs, combined with the gloom around, does make them tremendously fertile soil for any seed.

"And as an example of what seed can be sown, I would quote from the letter of an old girl who is now about 20 and who has been this summer to Yugoslavia to work on the 'Youth Railway'. She gives a vivid account of the work done. Her letter is full of such phrases as 'It is a wonderful experience to work to a National Plan when everyone knows not only the date by which the railway will be finished but the daily target, and to realize that an extra spadeful means that the country is one second nearer prosperity. The great Vranduk tunnel which the Belgrade mining engineering students and the Greeks are building, which is a mile long, is already a month ahead of schedule': or 'Everything is one joyous upsurge and ecstatic joy in rebuilding their country under terrible conditions. . . . I have never met a more happy or confident lot of people. Everywhere we went, everyone we talked to said the same thing—an old boatman, a workman in a café, the students—all said, "we are building a new world. Go back and tell the west the truth about our country." . . . If we could only bring that spirit into Britain, all our difficulties would melt away and we could overcome the crisis. . . . In comparison England seems like a bog or a coffin of sorts, where everybody is fast asleep. We have come back feeling frustrated and I long to ring all the church bells, carry the fiery cross from town to village, knock on all the doors, shake people, make them wake up and understand, give them a vision of the future and bring everyone to work with the joyous hope and confidence we met in Yugoslavia'.

"This girl, a clever and enterprising person, had already drunk deeply of the communist propaganda and philosophy before she went to Yugoslavia, and she is not the only one. But the thing I continually ask myself is what have we got to set in its place? Or rather, in what terms can it be expressed

so that it will have a living relationship to the thoughts of the many eager young people seeking for a meaning and purpose in life ?

"I have no quick or easy answer to give, and, like many others, am continually trying to work out answers in daily life. I hope perhaps someone may give their answer to us in the News-Letter."

There was some discussion at the Editorial Board of the Christian News-Letter on this matter of the Youth Railway and the kind of reaction which it evoked and the restlessness which it engendered in young people, so well expressed by the letter we have just quoted. After this meeting one member of the Board wrote as follows :

"If we take the Youth Railway as a type of social adventure, we must understand that anything on so large a scale requires more common purpose in society than we can show. In fact, British society behaves like a lot of jealous sections, and not as one community. But the community's health depends on quick reactions to its circumstances, actions quicker than sectional selfishness allows. It might be the task of Christians to point the way by voluntary action to the obvious needs of the community. They would not be doing anything specifically Christian, but they would be true leaders of the community. An obvious example is the delay in the turn-round of railway waggons because of no Saturday working. It seems to me that Christian gangs could obtain a good deal of notice for an important economic need, and also get a little social adventure, in making a Saturday raid on sidings to unload waggons. Harvest camps, of course, are already well to the fore. I don't know whether Christian bands as such have gone *en bloc* to the country.

"But, of course, this sort of thing won't satisfy the young lady. She wants to have the brave wind of the new world blowing through her hair. You can't possibly have that, as I see it, unless you live in a society agreed upon its ends—or where a group have made their ends society's. '*Having the will*'—that is what distinguishes us from Yugoslavia."

The enduring popularity of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is due to the presence in all of us of the Crusoe

instincts. We all build in our childhood houses in trees furnished with infinite care and taste by careful pickings from the garden shed and the rubbish dump. Nothing equals the thrill of this kind of building. But when the fabrication is finished the fun of the game has gone and we sit down disconsolately, wondering what we do with our finished house. That is the story of civilized societies. You want a railway ; you have the willing people, and you make it. There the Slavs have it over the Anglo-Saxons. The question what you do when you have got your railway and the thousand and one other things, material and cultural, that make up a civilized society, lies in the future and does not have to be thought about. What we are finding out in this country now is that it takes just as much hard struggle, individual effort and sacrifice to maintain what others in the past have built for us and adapt what they have left to present needs, as to build it in the first place. It is a far more humdrum task. It is much more exciting to shovel sand and blast rock for the sake of your country than to give up smoking to save dollars or work on Saturday mornings. To teach an illiterate to read is one of the most thrilling experiences in human communication, but when there aren't any more illiterates the question becomes one of what people are to read—and this by comparison is just a dreary headache.

Is the young lady escaping, as she thinks, from old, tired past-ridden Britain into the future, the brave new world which is to be—or is she really escaping into the past, into the early days of any society, where the toughest problems do not need to be faced ? That is a solution by simplification. There is also another simplification. The general impression given by some who went from this country to work on the Youth Railway is that this upsurge of youthful vitality in Yugoslavia is the natural fruit of communism. Frank Thompson, communist though he was, showed an insight deeper than theirs, when he said it was " broader and more generous than any dogma ". The communist masters of Yugoslavia have had the wit to let this vigour flow and pour itself out in hard unrequited work, inspired by an intense idealism. Yet when the psychological

atmosphere reached that point where Christians would pour their aspiration into some culminating act of worship, what happened on the Youth Railway? A group of Trade Union leaders arrived from Moscow, were greeted with frenzied ovations, and the car containing them, engine running and chauffeur at the wheel, was carried bodily down the hill.

When Sir Stafford Cripps said in the House of Commons at the close of a speech announcing very drastic cuts that he wished our country to-day could refresh its heart and mind with a deep draught of that Christian faith which has come down to us over 2,000 years, he was greeted with cheers, and he sat down after saying that self-sacrifice, honour and love and comradeship were the strongest power in our lives amid what *The Times* called " loud and prolonged cheers ". The cheers were not for Sir Stafford personally, and he would not have them be. They were for what he said in his closing words. More and more commonly is it being said by men in many departments of the nation's life that what is lacking is the reliance upon non-material sources of power, that something in the spirit thwarts men's efforts at the human level and cannot be put right by human means. If Sir Stafford called for 50,000 young volunteers to undertake a job of national service, what sort of response would he get? Would he not be rightly told that to claw the naked rock with spades when you have bulldozers is folly? Our crisis is primarily one of vision: we have not seen our nation where it is—not tagging along in the rear but moving where others have not yet tried to tread. That the youngest of our great parties, coming for the first time to power, should so conspicuously have failed to make people see this vision is perhaps a greater failure than any economic blunder could have been.

The writer of this week's Supplement is now Bishop of Madura, S. India.

Kathleen Bliss

SOME THOUGHTS ON BRITAIN FROM ABROAD

BY J. E. L. NEWBIGIN

DEAR EDITOR,

During the voyage back to India I have inevitably been turning over in my mind the experience of a year at home. Some things seem so clear and compelling to me that I want to say them to you, and to the readers of the News-Letter if you think them worth passing on. When one comes home after seven years away, one sees with an almost painful vividness things which otherwise one would not have noticed because they were so familiar, and one sees things from a point of view which the man on the spot cannot have. And when it comes to leaving again, after all the rich and happy experiences of furlough, one finds afresh how precious are many of the things which one would take for granted if one were not leaving them. That is my excuse for writing as I am going to do now.

The first thing I saw when I landed was a queue. Perhaps it will seem ridiculous to say that it brought a lump into my throat, but I confess that it did. The queue system will not work in India, because it contradicts the fundamental basis of society—which is caste. One had become accustomed to the frightful scrums that surrounded booking offices, and to the various methods of by-passing them. To see people quietly and without fuss taking their place behind one another and waiting their turn was a profoundly moving symbol of a different basis of society, of the belief that each one counts for one, and of the discipline that had made that belief part of the unconscious attitude of the ordinary man. Although queues became more familiar as days went by, that impression was not blunted—the impression of an immensely strong and resilient social discipline, rooted in the acceptance of the worth and responsibility of every man.

Many other things went to confirm that impression. I think the most impressive was the way the rationing system worked. In India one saw luxury and starvation side by side all the time. The mass of suffering was so colossal that it numbed the feeling

and paralysed the will. It was like coming into a new moral climate to come into a place where things were being shared equally, where one never saw a hungry child or a starving man, and where one knew that the little bit of extra economy needed in housekeeping was contributing to make that possible. It meant that all the time each one could play a responsible part—however small—in making life decent for all. It meant that economic life—in this part of it at least—was human and moral instead of brutish and meaningless.

Allied with that was the sense of the vitality of free institutions of all kinds. One had become used to the situation of a country governed by bureaucracy from above. It was—again—like breathing new air to find everywhere a multitude of free voluntary organizations, springing from the personal sense of responsibility of their members, and co-operating as free partners with Government. I shall be told that the vitality of these free institutions is declining. I reply that, even if that is so, the vitality that still remains is something to marvel at and to cherish.

Is it fanciful to add here one other impression? Wherever there was space for it, every house seemed to have its garden—even if it was only a window-box. I shall never forget the sight of them on the day we landed—mile after mile of them in all the glory of June. I was not prepared for them and they took my breath away. That too—surely—is a witness to something vital, a protest that every man has his own rooting in God's good earth even when the machines have all but made a desert of it; that every man has his own work of art to create, even if his job gives him no chance of doing it.

I will sum up the impression I have tried to convey by saying that it was the impression of a society deeply-rooted in the Christian belief that every man is precious in the sight of God and is responsible before God for his neighbour; a society making an effort of quite revolutionary importance to apply that belief in new ways to the problems of large-scale organization. I know that I am speaking of something which is an inheritance from the past, something built out of centuries of Christian worship, teaching and preaching, and that the inheritance is not being built up as it must be if it is to persist. I know also how terrible

have been the inroads into that inheritance, the destruction of family life represented in the divorce statistics, the loss of purpose represented in the figures of gambling, the many-sided lowering of moral standards in two wars. Nor do I forget the glaring examples, both among wage-earners and among the managerial and owning groups, of unwillingness to put national before private interests. These things are indeed great evils. But we shall not defeat them if we let them blind us to the resources we still have. I have tried to say—and I know that others in the same position agree with me—that what strikes one most forcibly when one comes home after seven years away is the persistence of the Christian inheritance in spite of all the immensely powerful forces which are seeking to destroy it. That is surely ground for courage as we face the immense new experiment in social organization which is now being made.

That brings me to the crux of what I want to say. What is being attempted in Britain to-day is surely the most important political happening in the whole world. An attempt is being made to create a kind of social and economic organization which will combine the measure of rational control without which modern society must disintegrate into chaos, with the measure of personal freedom without which society cannot remain human. We know, I think, that the two ways of life which so stridently compete for the control of the world—the way of unregulated capitalism and the way of totalitarian communism are both highways to disaster. The way we are trying to follow is the only one which offers hope for the future of our civilization. To the British people has been granted the high privilege of pioneering a road for this unified but disintegrating world we have inherited. Our only hope of success lies in the strength of our faith as to man's worth and responsibility.

It is because I believe this that I find it hard to understand how people can be so blind to what is going on, so defeatist, so ready to believe the worst about Britain's present and future. Of course blunders have been made and are being made. But in exposing blunders we have surely to remember what is being attempted. No serious person in any political party believes in the removal of all controls and the return to nineteenth-century capitalism. Criticism of controls must surely be within the framework of a

clear understanding of the kind of society we are trying to create, and not an attempt merely to exploit the natural unwillingness of unregenerate man to accept social discipline. Coming from the squalor and hunger and misery of India to the incredibly well-stocked shops, the healthy, well-fed children, the security and solidarity of Britain, it was hard to listen patiently to the continual lament that the country was going to ruin because (it generally appeared) one could not get exactly the kind of stockings or tooth-paste one got before the war. During the year we were at home, fed a good deal better than we had been for seven years in India, we received three parcels of food from unknown friends on the other side of the world. One blushed for shame at the beggarly shouting of our troubles that had brought forth this generosity in a world still so full of people who really know what hunger is.

Perhaps the Christian tradition is not strong enough to bear the new strains we are putting on it. Perhaps it has already been so much weakened by the contempt of Christian worship and teaching that it is incapable of bearing the fruit we look for. Perhaps this experiment is to fail. We do not know. But surely for Christians the situation is—to this extent—clear. We have been given as a nation the chance, bought at a fearful price, to work out a kind of society based on the free acceptance of mutual obligation—the only kind of society holding out any hope of life to the world. We are surely bound to regard it as a very high privilege to have been matched with this hour, to have a share in a struggle that will be decisive not only for Britain but also for the world. Surely this is a time when all Christians can "go to it" with a good courage, understanding themselves and making clear to others the ethical issues at stake, and pointing all men to the only faith which can sustain a society of free and responsible men and women. If ever there was a time when we might rightly count it a high privilege to be British citizens, it is surely now.

Yours sincerely, J. E. L. NEWBIGIN.

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